

TITLE: Some Thoughts on Political Instability

AUTHOR: (b)(3)(c)

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## SOME THOUGHTS ON POLITICAL INSTABILITY

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(b)(3)(c) excellent article, "The Two Faces of Political Instability," which appeared in the Spring 1987 issue of *Studies in Intelligence*, has led me to rethink my own ideas on the subject. I agree that, while the intelligence community has been engaged in political instability analysis for many years, only recently has it begun to approach the problem in a systematic way. (b)(3)(c) article advances the cause, and I hope that my remarks will do the same.

## Definitions

(b)(3)(c) described the two faces of political instability as *potential* and *commotion*. The former is the probability of a sudden, major change in a country's politics, while the latter consists of events such as demonstrations, strikes, riots, issuances of manifestoes, military states of alert, the emergence of hitherto underground opposition groups, and increasingly vocal demands for a government to quit.

I define political instability as *observable evidence of non-self-correcting pressure that, if not counteracted by other forces, would lead to a major change in policy, regime, or system*. The rationale for this definition is as follows:

- *Observable evidence* is my redundant way of getting around (b)(3)(c) problem of "instability as potential" and "instability as commotion." For me, instability as commotion is a subset of instability as potential. Observable evidence of pressure may take the form of a food riot or of a blip in the inflation rate, of an assassination or of an increasingly unequal Gini coefficient. In all of these cases, we are mainly interested in the potential they show for major change. If the food riot or assassination develops into a revolt, we are no longer talking about instability but rather the results of instability.
- By using the term *non-self-correcting pressure*, I want to emphasize that most political systems—even in the Third World—are in stable equilibrium. That is to say, any major deviation from normal political practice carries within itself the seeds of its own correction. Thus, if in a certain state the military is accustomed to getting X percent of the budget and this percentage is reduced, the military will exert such pressure as may be required to restore its "rightful" share. Even though tanks may roll up to the national palace, this will be part of the "normal" process of restoring stability. If an unstable equilibrium exists, however, then the same cut in the military budget could lead either to a military government or to complete civilian domination—in either case a "major change" according to my definition.

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- By specifying *if not counteracted by outside forces*, I want to underline the fairly obvious point that destabilizing pressures can be offset by stabilizing pressures. For example, a destabilizing economic policy may not lead to a "major change," if a loyal and well-trained police force stands in the way.
- My definition makes clear that political instability (all other things being equal) *would lead to a major change in policy, regime, or system*. I use "would" rather than "could" or "might" or "would tend to" in order to avoid the "pressures are building" syndrome that affects so much writing about political instability. This disgraceful cop-out allows the analyst to come down firmly on both sides. If there is a revolution, the analyst can say that he or she predicted it; if nothing happens, the analyst can say that pressures are still building. Any statement that cannot be proved wrong by future events is worthless.

**Ethnocentrism**

Many political writers both within and outside the community seem to operate under the unstated assumption that political instability is a Third World phenomenon (or rather that Third World political systems are in unstable equilibrium while developed world systems are in stable equilibrium). We do not seem to regard repeated political assassinations in this country as instability indicators; how would we feel if the equivalents of Kennedy and King had been killed in South Africa or South Korea? Blocks of downtown Washington went up in flames in 1968 and no one (in this country, at least) thought the government was about to fall; if the flames had been in Buenos Aires or Cairo, would we have been as sanguine? Is massive corruption in Mexico City an indicator of instability while massive corruption in New York City is irrelevant? This is not to argue that the same events have the same meaning in different countries—they don't—but rather to suggest that judgments should be conscious and rational rather than unconscious and ethnocentric.

In this regard, let me make a couple of "outlandish" statements for the reader's consideration:

- In terms of "a major change in policy, regime, or system," the coming of de Gaulle in 1958 is right up there with the coming of the Brazilian generals in 1964 and the coming of Khomeini in 1979. It should have been—and perhaps was—predicted by the instability indicators of the period.
- Mexico is the most politically stable country in the Western Hemisphere. Could Canada, Venezuela, or the United States have withstood an across-the-board fall in living standards which some authorities estimate to be as much as 50 percent in four years without a "major change in policy, regime, or system"?

The Marxists have a faith that the world *must* keep changing until communism is reached; we have a similar faith that political systems *must* come to resemble our own (or that of the United Kingdom) if they are to

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achieve long-term stability. We (and the Marxists) would be on firmer ground if we were to admit that these predictions are more a reflection of our desires than of our understanding of history and political dynamics.

**Are Universal Indicators Possible?**

I have struggled with this question for several years, first with the old Social Science Research Division and more recently in my connection with the Office of Global Issues' *Political Instability Quarterly*. I am tempted to say no. It seems obvious that, under some circumstances, poverty can be a catalyst for revolt and, under others, it can sap the will to rebellion. In one country heavy-handed repression sparks unrest, while in another it keeps unrest under control. In some cases riots lead to further change, in others they act as escape valves to reduce political pressure. The same can be said for most other proposed universal indicators.

Recently, however, I have become somewhat more optimistic. Although many of the most important political instability indicators will remain country specific—and even universal indicators will have to be applied with a country-specific twist—I do spy some universals on the horizon. (b)(6) work on the youth bulge, while not totally convincing in all of its details, appears to contain a nugget of universal applicability; that is, young people are more volatile than older people and if, in the relevant population (nation, city, or ethnic group), the youth bulge hits a certain (undetermined) high percentage, "a major change" becomes very likely.

My own search for universal indicators—which is still in its preliminary stage and may not pan out in the long run—is along very different lines. Going back to some insights from a previous incarnation as an anthropologist and to a more recent examination of Indian revolts in colonial Mexico, I have come to the conclusion that a good part of political stability rests on what I call "implicit promises and bargains." When a government or its perceived agent breaks such an implicit promise, a condition of political instability has been created. This appears to hold true across cultures.\*

**The Implicit Promise**

Implicit promises and bargains come in many forms. All university graduates get white-collar jobs. One-third of your crop goes to the landlord, another third to Church and State, and you keep the remaining third. If you keep your nose clean, you won't get hurt. The president has no right to involve himself in purely military affairs. The police can't enter a university building without the rector's permission. The common land belongs to the village and cannot be taken by the hacendado. The president cannot serve more than one term. The "political class" cannot be denied an opportunity to take part in government. We have the right to be ruled by a pious king. Bus fares cannot be raised. If you march with the party and vote right, the party will get your kid out of jail or your wife into a hospital. The government cannot seize your farm without due process of the law.

\* For further discussion of this concept, see the next article, "Political Instability: A Psychological Perspective," by Helene L. Boatner, and the Richard M. Helms book review, *For Lust of Knowing*.

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What all of these implicit promises have in common is that they remove uncertainty. They set the ground rules. They let a person (or a group) know what he or she can reasonably hope for (a white-collar job, for example) and what he or she has no cause to fear (getting hurt if his or her nose is clean). It is ironic that people—even in the developed countries—take such implicit promises of the political culture much more seriously than the explicit promises of politicians and rulers. We are not shocked if a president fails to balance the budget despite promises to do so; we would be shocked if a president were to send troops to close Congress.

History appears to show that people will accept high degrees of poverty, inequality, hardship, and repression as long as implicit promises and bargains are not broken. A major cause of the Mexican revolution of 1910 was the failure of the dictator Porfirio Diaz to keep a rashly made promise to step down. This explicit promise entailed the implicit promise of a new political era. During the three decades of Diaz's rule before he made that promise, he had little effective opposition; thus it seems clear that the initial cause of the revolution was not years of tyranny but the breaking of a promise only a few months old. In a similar fashion, the Chamorro assassination in Nicaragua—the event that, in my opinion, determined the success of the Nicaraguan revolution—was seen as breaking an implicit bargain between Somoza and his nonviolent opposition. Even the Iranian revolution may be basically the result of a broken implicit promise that "Iran should remain Iran," rather than the result of corruption, unemployment, SAVAK brutality, or any of the other causes often proposed.

The broken-implicit-promise indicator, like all political instability indicators, is difficult to use. Although it is (I believe) universal in the sense that it operates in all societies, it can only be used successfully by someone with country-specific knowledge. It will take a Russian expert, for example, to say whether Gorbachev's use of increased income differentiation to spur production breaks an implicit promise of relative income equality. And it will take a South African expert to tell us whether Botha's slow movement on reform is intended to avoid the politically destabilizing effects of breaking an implicit promise to his Afrikaner constituency.

I want to reemphasize that I do not claim that all political instability can be reduced to broken implicit promises or bargains. In some cases, this factor may be of great importance, while in others it may have little relevance. Whatever the relevance of implicit promises for instability from the South African extreme right, I doubt that they have much bearing on instability stemming from the dissatisfaction of the black majority. I suspect that instability arising from the Sikh community in India is about equally the result of broken implicit promises and other factors. At the other extreme, I believe that, if the Chilean military decides to remove Pinochet from the presidency, it will be almost entirely because of broken implicit promises.

**The Future**

Political instability analysis will remain an art, not a science. And, as (b)(3)(c) article implied, the best artists will be those—regretably few either inside or outside the community—who combine deep country-specific

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knowledge with a profound understanding of instability patterns through history and across cultures. No computer program will do our job for us.

That said, I do believe that indicators can be devised that will make the country-knowledgeable analyst's job easier. One set of these indicators must be highly country specific. Another set may depend heavily on demography or even geography; for example, it may turn out that a revolt is unlikely during the rainy season in any tropical nation. A third set of indicators could be based on the broken-implicit-promise factor—perhaps combined with elements of Gurr's relative deprivation theory. I believe that, in the future, these three sets of indicators will allow a skilled and knowledgeable country analyst to make reasonably accurate projections of major change—or, equally important, the absence of major change—even in counterintuitive cases where expert opinion is divided. In this best of all possible worlds, we should never again have to read, "Pressures are building, but the staying power of the government should not be underestimated."

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